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U.S. congressmen push for compensation for ex-GI slaves

March 21, 2001

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WASHINGTON -- American servicemen forced into slave labor for Japanese companies during the Second World War should be allowed to pursue compensation in court from their former corporate captors, two U.S. congressman said.

Republican Rep. Dana Rohrabacher and Democratic Rep. Michael Honda, both from California, planned a news conference Thursday to push a measure called the Justice for United States POWs Act of 2001.

In a letter to colleagues this week looking for support for the bill, Rohrabacher said it would pursue justice through the U.S. court system and allow states to extend the statute of limitations applicable to these claims for up to 10 years.

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"Since the end of the World War II, the Japanese corporations that abused these former POWs (prisoners of war) and profited from their forced labor have prospered enormously," Rohrabacher wrote.

"Many of these companies are now household names in the United States," he added. "As an ethical and moral matter, they long ago should have voluntarily reached out to their victims and settled this injustice."

More than 36,000 U.S. soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen and civilian construction workers were slaves in Japan during the war.

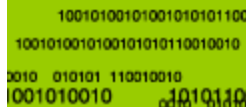
Some 10,000 died in captivity and thousands more suffered malnutrition and serious illness while enslaved at such Japanese corporate giants as Mitsui & Co, Nippon S Corp and Kawasaki Heavy Industries.

They were supposed to be paid a tiny fee but even this was withheld, some of the former prisoners have said.

Efforts at litigation have been muted. Dozens of lawsuits have been filed in the United States seeking compensation from Japanese firms, many of these in

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California where the filing deadline was pushed back to 2010, and most of these were consolidated as a federal case.

But a federal judge dismissed the consolidated case last September, siding with the long-held Japanese government position that the 1951 peace treaty that Tokyo signed with most of its Second World War opponents settled the issue of reparations. The treaty denied full compensation to the former slaves.

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